



AUSTRALIAN DELEGATION TO THE ISO/IEC JTC1 DIS 29500 BALLOT RESOLUTION MEETING – GENEVA, SWITZERLAND – 25-29 FEBRUARY 2008

Background

In late 2005 ECMA International submitted its specification ECMA-376 Information technology – Office Open XML file formats for approval by ISO/IEC JTC1 as a joint international standard via the fast track Publicly Available Specification (PAS) process¹. The standard failed to be adopted at the first stage of formal voting by member countries, and a range of technical comments will be considered in Geneva at a ballot resolution meeting (BRM) from 25-29 February 2008.

There has been considerable interest, in adoption of this standard, expressed by government agencies, large and small IT companies, and the open source community. The views of these stakeholders are divergent and polarised. In the light of the clear lack of consensus on the adoption of this standard, Standards Australia chose to abstain from formal voting, and provided thirty general and technical comments for consideration.

Standards Australia Process and Role

Standards Australia is recognised by the Government as Australia's peak standards body. It develops Australian Standards® of public benefit and national interest and supports excellence in design and innovation through the Australian International Design Awards.

Standards Australia is Australia's representative on the International Organization for Standardization [ISO], the International Electrotechnical Commission [IEC], and the joint ISO/IEC technical committee on Information Technology, JTC1.

As a Participating member, we are obligated to vote on JTC1 ballots. Where we have an established technical committee acting as a formal mirror to the corresponding JTC1 area of interest, we take advice from that technical committee. In the absence of a technical committee, the Communications, Information Technology and e-Commerce (CITeC) Standards Sector Board (SSB)

¹ This process consists of a number of potential stages –

- review for acceptance for fast track processing;
- a consultation period with national members of ISO/IEC;
- formal ballot including the opportunity to submit comments;
- period for the proposer to respond to comments;
- ballot resolution meeting to dispose of comments
- consideration of final resolutions and the opportunity to revisit the ballot vote

acts as the senior advisory group on JTC1 decisions, where deemed necessary by Standards Australia. The CITeC SSB has endorsed Standards Australia's consultation process on this issue on a number of occasions. The CITeC SSB also endorsed Standards Australia's recommendation to submit an Abstain vote on this standard on 2 September 2007.

Standards Australia has continued to implement a process with appropriate checks and balances to support consideration of this Draft International Standard, in line with its general principles of openness, transparency and consensus. We have considered many comments, held a public forum, extended deadlines for comment and convened an ad hoc technical advisory group to assist in developing an Australian position, and brief for an Australian delegation to the BRM.

Development of Australian Position

Understanding the significance of the global debate surrounding the adoption of this ECMA standard by ISO, Standards Australia has appointed a senior delegation to attend the ballot resolution meeting addressing National Body comments on draft international standard 29500.

We have worked actively with an advisory working group consisting of representatives of IBM Australia, Microsoft Australia, National Archives of Australia, Google Australia, Open Source Industry Australia Limited, GNOME and others to develop Australian positions on the ECMA proposed responses to the comments we submitted with our abstain vote to ISO/IEC JTC1 in September 2007.

The group has met twice, in November 2007 and January 2008, and will meet again in early March. It will also be in communication with the delegation via an e-mail discussion list.

Standards Australia has also been actively consulting with the Australian Government Information Management Office at the Department of Finance and Deregulation regarding this issue.

Appointment and Composition of Delegation

Standards Australia committed early on to supporting a delegation to the Ballot Resolution meeting to assist in promoting the Australian comments. We fixed our delegation size at two in early December 2007, and named two potential delegates at that time, the relevant Standards Australia Program Manager, and an independent consultant to Standards Australia. Standards Australia was required to confirm a final delegation on 31 January 2008. Neither of these nominees were available, for personal reasons, as of late January.

The Senior Project Manager of the IT and Commerce area at Standards Australia was appointed as Head of Delegation, supported by an alternative technical expert. These delegates were appointed as a team to provide:

- A full understanding of the proposed standard
- The ability to understand the consequences of changes to the standard as the presented during the BRM
- Clear focus on the priority list of technical issues affecting Australia and a full knowledge of the views of the technical working group on how to address and resolve these issues
- The ability and willingness to work towards consensus
- The ability to present concrete examples to assist the resolution process readiness to leave personal opinions out of discussions
- Good negotiation skills
- Understanding of, and history of participation in, ISO/IEC standards development processes.

The delegates have provided appropriate undertakings to us that they are fully conversant with the technical material and the positions developed during the working group process; that the Head of Delegation has the responsibility for all Australian positions; that they will work as a team; that they are participating as delegates of Standards Australia and not as an agent of any personal or organisational viewpoint; and that they are funded by Standards Australia and themselves only.

Standards Australia stands by the appointed delegation, the decision making process used to select it and the agreed framework within it will operate to properly represent the Australian position.

The ballot resolution meeting is a working technical meeting to address comments raised in the voting process, and will not decide whether the standard will be adopted.

Brief for Australian Delegation

The brief that the Australian delegation is taking has been developed in conjunction with the working group through e-mail discussions and physical meetings.

The brief consists of:

- Particular advice on Australian issues that have been responded to by ECMA and that have been resolved to Australia's satisfaction
- Particular advice on Australian issues that have been responded to by ECMA and that have not been resolved to Australia's satisfaction, with guidance on how to proceed
- Application of a broad set of guiding principles consistent with principles of consensus to issues that have not been previously discussed. The delegation will support unanimous decision making where there are no issues of substance, for example in the acceptance of general editorial comments, or where there is no substantial disagreement or sustained opposition on technical resolutions.
- If a position has been established regarding an Australian comment then the principle may be extended, if it applies equally, to another similar comment, for example, mathematical equations should return correct values.
- Where there is a clear lack of consensus at the meeting on issues where there has been no formal advice, prior to or during the meeting, the Australian delegation will abstain if a vote is called.

There are a number of additional sources of advice available to the delegation at the BRM via e-mail – Standards Australia staff will be available to provide guidance and experience on process and policy, and the technical working group to provide further guidance on technical matters.

Process following the BRM

The delegation will meet at Standards Australia to provide a verbal report to SA management on 5 March, 2008.

The delegation will provide a written report from the meeting by 7 March for distribution to the technical group and the CITeC SSB. The report will include:

- General commentary regarding the running of the meeting, and participation by and composition of other delegations
- Key decisions on Australian comments
- Key decisions on other comments that affect Australian positions or the whole draft standard
- Issues of major controversy, and any Australian response
- Consultation during the week with the technical working group

The technical working group will meet on 11 March to discuss the report and identify any issues for recommendation to the CITEC SSB.

Standards Australia will provide a recommendation during the week of 17-21 March to the CITEC SSB for consideration.

Standards Australia will communicate any advice to JTC1 if necessary by 29 March, 2008.

John Tucker
Chief Executive Officer
21 February 2008
